The Truth and Falsehood of Chaucer's *The Manciple's Tale*[*]

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I. "Whit was this crowe as is a snow-whit swan . . ."

There is classical material in *The Knight's Tale*, with Theseus's war with the Amazons, and in *The Monk's Tale* with Semiramis, and in *The Physician's Tale*, based ultimately on Livy, but for sheer length of textual record the main plot of *The Manciple's Tale* is unmatched in *The Canterbury Tales*.[1] True, the Sources and Analogues section of the Variorum[2] starts with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but Ovid was responding to Callimachus, who certainly knew Pindar and who referred in typically oblique Alexandrian fashion to Hesiod. The various versions of the tale of Apollo, Coronis, Asclepius, and the Crow are not a simple collection of texts with the "same" material. Rather, they provide us with a sequence of authors each of whom constructs a poem using available rhetorical and culturally-determined devices to say something particular to his own audience.

From the beginning it was an intertextual affair. In his epyllion *Hecale*, the Alexandrian poet Callimachus (ca. 310–ca. 240 BCE) incidentally included a brief reference to a story about a raven

> . . . ὃς νῦν γε καὶ ἂν κύκνοισιν ἐρίζοι
> καὶ γάλακι χροιὴν καὶ κύματος ἄκρῳ ἀώτῳ,
> κυάνεον φὴ πίσσαν ἐπὶ πτερὸν οὐλοὸν ἕξει,
> ἀγγελίης ἐπίχειρα, τά οἱ ποτε Φοῖβος ὀπάσσει.
> ὁππότε κεν Φλεγύαο Κορωνίδος ἀμφὶ θυγατρός
> Ἴσχυϊ πληξίππῳ σπομένης μιαρόν τι πύθηται.
>
> who now rivals the swans and milk in color and the loom at the peak of the wave, will be black as pitch on its ill-omened wing, the reward that Apollo will give him when he hears

[*] An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at the *International Congress of Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University* in 1986. References to more recent editions of text added in 2025.

[1] All quotations from Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[2] *A Variorum Edition of The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 2, *The Canterbury Tales*, pt. 10, *The Manciple's Tale*, ed. Donald C. Baker (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, p. 4.

> something ugly about Coronis the daughter of Phlegyas running off with Ischys the charioteer.[3]

Successive tellers of this tale followed the mannerist technique of the Alexandrian poets in making the raven[4] rather than the god or his mistress the rhetorical focus of the story, and in trying to outdo each other in their descriptions of the bird's whiteness. Ovid, in the Metamorphoses, outdid Callimachus by comparing the whiteness of the raven to three species of birds, adding doves and geese to Callimachus' swans:

> nam fuit haec quondam niueis argentea pennis
> ales, ut aequaret totas sine labe columbas
> nee seruaturis uigili Capitolia uoce
> cederet anseribus nee amanti flumina cycno. (II 536-39) .[5]

Guillaume de Machaut outperformed Ovid: he mentions the same three birds, reintroduces milk, and adds the flower of the hawthorn:

> Li corbiaus iadis plume blanche
> Avoit . plus que la noif seur branche,
> Ne que coulon . gente . ne cine,
> Ne que la fleur de laube espine.
> Brief en li navoit riens de lait,
> Car il estoit plus blans que lait. (7792–97).[6]

> At one time the crow had feathers
> Whiter than snow on the branch,
> Whiter than the dive, the goose, or swan,
> Whiter than the hawthorn flower.
> In short, he was in no way ugly,
> Being whiter than milk itself.

Chaucer's Manciple, despite his usual garrulity, says only "whit was this crowe as is a snow-whit swan" (133). Chaucer's decision to limit the parallels to the swan alone has two different effects. Negatively, it removes from the story certain themes which the

[3] Callimachus, *Hecale*, fragment 74, ll. 15–20, in *Callimachus II*, ed. and trans. Dee L. Clayman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 80 and p. 81.

[4] Complaints about Chaucer's ornithological knowledge and assertions that he changed the raven to a crow are incorrect. "Crowe" is an acceptable translation for "corvus" in the *Promptorium Parvulorum*, in the Wycliffite Bible, and in dictionaries as late as the sixteenth century. Symbolically, crows and ravens are all but identical; see Beryl Rowland, *Birds with Human Souls* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978), pp. 35ff. The choice to use the word "crowe" is at least partially determined by its use in current proverbial expressions.

[5] All citations from Ovid are taken from P. Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses*, ed. R.J. Tarrant (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).

[6] Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Livre du Voir Dit*, ed. Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, tr. R. Baron Palmer (New York: Garland, 1998).

author wishes to avoid in his narrative. Positively, it focuses our attention on the motif of concealed nature, which plays an essential part in the rest of the tale. In the Middle Ages, Ovid's private and ironic reference to the geese which saved the Capitol from an invasion by barbarians in 389 B.C. had been transformed into a conventional reference, and geese had come to typify the faithful warning servant: Chaucer himself refers to the "waker goos" in *The Parliament of Fowls* (358). The dove as a symbol of the good messenger, or even the divine spirit, would make the point of the contrast with the raven even more emphatically for a medieval writer than for Ovid. The two are contrasted in the story of Noah in Genesis, and the reference in Psalm 67 to the "wings of a dove covered with silver" might well have come into play if the crow had been compared to a dove. If his purpose was to display the crow as an example of an ill-rewarded messenger, a medieval writer could do no better than to write "whit was this crowe as is a snow-whit dove." Both in his imagery and in his narrative, however, Chaucer suppresses the theme of the messenger. In both Ovid and Machaut the bird must make a lengthy journey in order to inform Phoebus about Coronis' infidelity, and while on the journey, another bird attempts to dissuade him from his task, warning by its own history that such tale-tellers are not well rewarded. In *The Manciple's Tale*, the crow does not travel at all, but is kept in a cage at home and must await Phebus' return in order to tell him what has happened.

The positive effect of the swan simile is to highlight two themes which replace the familiar reading of the story as a presentation of the ill-rewarded messenger. The lesser and more local of these themes relates to the widely-known "swan-song." Chaucer refers to the fact that the swan's last song is its most beautiful both in *The Legend of Good Women* (1355–56) and in *Anelida and Arcite* (346–47). In *The Manciple's Tale*, the crow's last song (and we are reminded twice that it is a "song") is far from sweet: "Cokkow! cokkow! cokkow!" (243). The more general theme relates to a different piece of information from the "book of the world" about swans, one more directly relevant to their colour. While it is true that swans are white in plumage, their flesh is black, as we are reminded by the *De bestiis et aliis rebus*.[7] The reference to the swan is therefore the first indication of the story's concern with the disparity between an external covering and an internal reality.

This concern is also to be found in a number of other places in the tale, both in the narrative material and in the Manciple's digressions. At the end of the story, for example, where the analogues present a magical metamorphosis of the bird – the heading in Machaut reads "Comment li corbiaus blans fu muez en plume noir [How the White Crow's Feathers Turned Black]– Chaucer presents a physical plucking:

And to the crowe he stirte, and that anon,

[7] *De bestiis et aliis rebus*, 1.53, *PL* 177, col. 51. I owe this reference to Charlotte C. Morse, *The Pattern of Judgment in the* Queste *and* Cleanness (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), p. 103.

> And pulled his white fetheres everychon,
> And made hym blak . . . (303–5)

The choice to write "as is a snow-whit swan" rather than some variation of "as a snow-whit swan" should perhaps be taken to suggest that the crow is white *in the same way* that a swan is white, that is, white on the outside but black on the inside. Similarly, when the crow is introduced, we are told that

> . . . countrefete the speche of every man
> He koude, whan he sholde telle a tale. (134–35)

Since the crow never demonstrates this ability to do impressions, the detail is not present as a plot device: the word "countrefete" is used as a sign that his speaking ability (and, by implication, his ability to sing better than a nightingale) is an artificial cover for his true voice. It is not surprising, then, that Phebus should also punish him by depriving him of "al his song" (305). In physique and sound, then, the bird demonstrates Chaucer's concern with the disparity between appearance and reality.

When the Manciple comes to his series of *exempla* and metalinguistic analyses, the same pattern prevails. The bird, he says, which is kept in a cage, appears to be a tame pet, but given the chance it will discard all the artificial trappings of its life and revert to its true nature. The cat will similarly escape its owner's "civilizing" efforts at the first opportunity. A man may call himself a tyrant or a captain, but that does nothing to change the fact that he is merely an outlaw, nor do terms such as "lady" permanently cover the reality of a "wenche" or "lemman."

It is a short step from this kind of thinking to the structure of the major events in the story. Like the bird in the cage in the Manciple's exemplum, Phebus' wife is fostered and treated with special care, and yet turns aside from this careful treatment in a way which reveals a quite different sort of nature. Like the she-wolf, who chooses the "lewedeste wolf . . . leest of reputacioun" (184–5) as her mate, the wife deceives Phebus with a "man of litel reputacioun" (199), one who is "Noght worth to thee, as in comparisoun, / The montance of a gnat" (254–5). The connection is further signalled by the stylistic parallelism between the introductions of the wife and of the crow:

> Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a crowe (130)

> Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a wyf (139)

The wife, like both the exemplary animals and the crow which is the tale's center of attention, has a covering set of external appearances which hide a rather contrary sort of nature.

Chaucer is not the kind of artist to present us with a simple conglomeration of static examples of the contrast between appearance and reality without providing an organizing principle. I doubt if there is any reader of medieval literature who would not expect the "white outside/black inside" reference to the swan to be given a moral allegor-

ical meaning. It is, in fact, this moral which helps to organize the other examples of the theme and to show that the plucking of the crow is simply an outward representation of the same kind of natural self-revelation shown by the exemplary animals. The *De bestiis et aliis rebus* explains that the swan's white feathers and black flesh are a sign for dissimulation and hypocrisy, for the black flesh is hidden just as sin is hidden by dissimulation.[8] This statement from the book of the world may be connected with Christ's overt condemnation of hypocrites in Matthew:

> Vae vobis scribae et phariaei hypocritae quia similes estis sepuchris dealbatis, quae a forisparent hominbus speciosa, intus vero plena sunt ossibus mortuorum, et omni spurcitia! (Matt. 23:27)[9]
>
> Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; because you are like to whited sepulchres, which outwardly appear to men beautiful, but within are full of dead men's bones, and of all filthiness.[10]

The two are combined in a passage in *La Queste del Saint Graal*, in which a swan which appears to Sir Bors is authoritatively interpreted as a hypocrite and a devil by one of the work's numerous helpful clerics:

> Par le blanc oisel qui avoit semblance de cisne doit len entendre l'anemi, et si vos dirai coment. Li cisnes est blans par defors et noirs par dedenz, ce est li ypocrites, qui est jaunes et pales, et semble bien, a ce qui defors en apert, que ce soit des serjanz Jhesucrist ; mes il est par dedenz si noirs et si horribles d'ordures et de pechiez qu'il engigne trop malement le monde.[11]
>
> The white bird shaped like a swan denotes the enemy, and I will tell you how this is. The swan is white without and black within, it is the hypocrite, who is fair-hued and pale and who gives every outward sign of being among the servants of Jesus Christ: but inwardly he is so black and hideous with the sludge of sin that he deceives the world most grossly.[12]

Chaucer himself alludes to this image in *The Summoner's Tale*, mentioning false clerics who "been lyk Jovinyan, / Fat as a whale, and walkynge as a swan" (1929–30), and who interpret their belches as prayers.

This introduction of a visible symbol of hypocrisy into the story provides us with an indication of the approach we are to take with regard to the Manciple's own behavior in his *Prologue*. The action begins when the host calls on the Cook to take his turn in

[8] *De bestiis*, 1.53.

[9] *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, ed. Alberto Colunga and Laurentio Turrado (MadridL Bibkioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1965).

[10] Biblical quotations are taken from the Douay-Rheims version, as closest to the sense of the Vulgate.

[11] *La Queste del Saint Graal : roman du 13e siècle*, ed. Albert Pauphilet (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1975, pp. 185–86.

[12] *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, tr. P.M. Matarasso (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 198.

the storytelling, but the Cook complains that he is too tired. The Manciple intervenes, politely enough, and offers to take his place to give him a rest (25–29). His tact and deferential words then yield to a diagnosis of the Cook's condition, which begins clinically and objectively enough but soon becomes offensive and personal:

> For, in good feith, thy visage is ful pale,
> Thyne eyen daswen eek, as that me thynketh,
> And, wel I woot, thy breeth ful soure stynketh:
> That sheweth wel thou art nat wel disposed.
> Of me, certeyn, thou shalt nat been yglosed (30–34).

Soon, the personal element predominates. He becomes abusive, and pointedly makes the Cook's unfortunate state a matter of public concern:

> See how he ganeth, lo, this dronken wight,
> As though he wolde swolwe us anonright.
> Hoold cloos thy mouth, man, by thy fader kyn!
> The devel of helle seete his foot therin!
> Thy cursed breth infecte wole us alle.
> Fy, stynkyng swyn! Fy, foule moote thee falle! (35–40)

It seems fair enough to suggest that the Manciple's true attitude toward the Cook and his infirmity is expressed in these lines, and not in the pleasant words with which he began. The friendliness he shows at first is merely an external covering for the venomous anger which he really feels. Once he has been warned by the host that these actions may turn against him, if the Cook should decide to reveal what he knows about the Manciple, the Manciple becomes mild-mannered again and tries to patch things up by offering the Cook more wine – the last thing he needs under the circumstances. When his true feelings have the potential to bring trouble upon him, he reverts to his earlier hypocritical stance; the Manciple, like the crow, might well be symbolized by the swan.

Chaucer has also made significant changes in his source when it comes to the portrayal of Phebus. In Ovid's version, Phoebus is not introduced formally in this episode, since he is well known to the audience through their previous experience and through earlier passages in the *Metamorphoses*. He is the god of light, prophecy, healing and music, and a god with a penchant for amorous relationships with humans, both male (Hyacinthus in X 302ff.) and female (Daphne in I 450ff. and Chione in XI 302ff.). Though he is divine, he is not always treated with respect: in the Daphne episode, Ovid shows us the ludicrous picture of a god who claims to be the revealer of past, present, and future (I 517) huffing and puffing through the forests after a girl we know (though he doesn't) that he will never catch. His divine status is still apparent in the Coronis episode in the fact that, though he is at Delphi when he learns about Coronis, it is as if distance does not exist for him: nothing is said about his travelling before he strikes her dead. Coronis' soft reproach – reminding him that she is pregnant with his son – instantly makes him sorry for his quick anger, and we are told that he hates the bird,

hates himself. As a god of healing, he tries to save her life, but he is unsuccessful. All he can do is prepare her corpse for burning, save his unborn son, and punish the messenger (II 598–630).

In Chaucer's version, Phebus is presented as dwelling on earth at the time that the story takes place. It may well be that Chaucer's source for this idea was in episodes of Ovid where reference is made to Phoebus' enforced earthly service, but this in no way accounts for the meaning of all the changes. Chaucer's Phebus is not a god masquerading as a human, is rather simply a man, albeit "the semelieste man / That is or was, sith that the world bigan" (119–20). He is a "lusty bachiler" (107) and has a wife, and is as jealous and solicitous as any human husband could be. He is away from home for a while, on some nondescript business, and when he returns, he learns of his wife's infidelity from a pet trained bird – the whole tone of the story is closer to the bourgeois world of *The Seven Sages of Rome* than to the *Metamorphoses*. When he has killed his wife, he is immediately sorry, and out of sorrow he breaks not only his bow, which was the instrument of his vengeance, but also all his musical instruments (262–69). Like Ovid's Phoebus, he is angry with the Crow, and punishes him; but he has no art with which to attempt to heal his wife, and he has no son to save from her womb. Instead, he expostulates at length on the difference between sudden wrath and properly advised anger (279ff.), in a scene which offers a reprise of the appearance / reality theme and helps to explain the literary purpose of all the preceding changes to the source.

All of the effects of this transformation of Phoebus the god into Phebus the bourgeois contribute to making the story a more serious examination of the problem of sinful human behavior. The relationship between a pagan god and a wanton human woman could not be considered a marriage, so Coronis is guilty of dalliance or inconstancy rather than adultery; in Chaucer's version, a sacrament has been violated. The problems of a god who can fly from Delphi to Thessaly in the space between two lines of a poem would hardly touch a fourteenth-century listener on the basis of his own personal experience, but the problems faced by Chaucer's Phebus come closer to home. Phoebus' healing abilities, even though unsuccessful, make his story an inappropriate vehicle for the idea that human actions cannot be simply reversed, and his ability to rescue Aesculapius leaves the audience with the feeling that, despite everything that has happened, all is not lost: Chaucer's Phebus has no such consolation, and is forced into a painful self-examination. Ovid's concern with displaying his own poetic talents yields to Chaucer's encouragement to think about the underlying sinfulness of Phebus' behavior, both in his homicide and in his subsequent despair and attempts at rationalization.

Ovid's Phoebus expresses hatred, against the raven, his weapons and himself. In Chaucer, by contrast, the dominant emotion is sorrow, but not a sorrow which leads to proper repentance. Instead of amending his behavior, he continues to take revenge, both on the crow, who is guilty, and on the bow, as if it were not simply an inanimate

object. His destruction of his musical instruments is even more irrational, in that they are totally unconnected with his wife's death: it is a self-destructive action, an outward and visible sign of the sinful despair he shows when he says "Allas! for sorwe I wol myselven slee!" (291). When he moves to self-reflection, trying to distinguish between the type of wrath that has caused his sorrow and a type which would be blameless, the distinction he chooses is incorrect, and assimilates even human reason to the set of external coverings for disturbing realities discussed above:

> O rakel hand, to doon so foule amys!
> O trouble wit, o ire recchelees,
> That unavysed smyteth gilteles!
> O wantrust, ful of fals suspecion,
> Where was thy wit and thy discrecion?
> O every man, be war of rakelnesse!
> Ne trowe no thyng withouten strong witnesse.
> Smyt nat to soone, er that ye witen why,
> And beeth avysed wel and sobrely
> Ere ye doon any execucion
> Upon youre ire for suspecion. (278–88)

This analysis of Ire separates it into two branches, one hasty and destructive, the other "avysed" and therefore acceptable, if not positively admirable. In this, Phebus' manner of thinking sets him apart from medieval manuals of sin, which condemn all vengeance, without respect for speed. The angry man is warned

> who-so wyll in dede be venged, god schall take vengeaunce on him. þerfore forȝyve him þat harmyth þe, & þanne, whanne þou prayist to god, þi synnes schal be forȝeuyn to þe. Ecc. xxviiij. "Qui vindicari vult a domino, inueniet vindictam. relinque proximo tuo tibi nocenti, & tunc tibi deprecanti peccata soluentur." þerfore, caste out of dede all þis wose of wrethe![13]

The contrast between hasty anger and "avysed" anger has quite a different purpose in the handbooks. Chaucer's Parson, after setting aside good Ire, which is "wrooth withouten bitternesse; nat wrooth agayns the man, but wrooth with the mysdede of the man," goes on to make the following distinction:

> Now understondeth that wikked Ire is in two maneres; that is to seyn, sodeyn Ire or hastif Ire, withouten avisement and consentynge of resoun. The menyng and the sens of this is that the resoun of a man ne consente nat to thilke sodeyn Ire, and thanne is it venial. Another Ire is ful wikked, that comth of felonie of herte avysed and cast biforn, with wikked wil to do vengeance, and therto his resoun consenteth; and soothly, this is deedly synne. This Ire is so displesant to God that it troubleth his hous, and chaceth the Hooly Goost out of mannes soule, and wasteth and destroyeth the liknesse of God – that is to

[13] *Jacob's Well: An Englisht Treatise on the Cleansing of Man's Conscience*, ed. A. Brandeis, *EETS*, o.s. 115, p. 95.

> seyn, the vertu that is in mannes soule – and put hym in the liknesse of the devel, and bynymeth the man fro God, that is his rightful lord. (*ParT* 540–45)

From this point of view, Phebus' sudden anger when he killed his wife was venial; if he had waited and plotted and become well-advised, the sin would have been deadly. His vengeance on the crow, in contrast, is all the more soul-destroying because it rests on reasoned consent.

Phebus' inability to understand that his distinction between the two types of anger is leading him into worse error may be explained by a comparison with the attitudes of his creator. Phebus believes that his problem has arisen through simple haste and that he could have avoided all his trouble through calm reflection. Similarly, the Manciple sees nothing inherently sinful in his angry and anger-provoking outburst against the Cook. He is troubled only by the fact that he has forgotten that he is vulnerable to attack from the Cook, who could denounce him for false reckonings. Second thoughts and properly advised behavior, he thinks, can avoid all the harmful effects of his own actions. This pragmatic approach limits the resources of his characters for understanding the true nature of the sin of Ire, and marks him as a more dangerous practitioner of the hypocritical cover-up than either the wife or, as we shall see, the crow. The Manciple, both in his tale and in his actions in his *Prologue*, treats human reason and human speech as a protective white cover for the blackness of the soul.

II. "…þes deofles corbin of helle"

The fact that the crow in *The Manciple's Tale* is plucked to reveal its blackness rather than transformed from white to black indicates that the qualities of "blackness" are already present in the bird before the tale's end. And, indeed, the crow's actions in the tale are clearly sinful, not just imprudent, and their particular type of sinfulness is closely associated with the common medieval view of crows.

The narrative requires that the crow inform Phebus about his wife's behavior, but each teller controls the manner in which this is done. Ovid describes the raven delivering his message briefly and factually, in emotionally neutral indirect discourse (II 598–99); Gower passes judgment – "And he that schrewe al that he can / Of his ladi to Phebus seide" – but does not linger on the event.[14] Chaucer's Manciple, however, deals with the details of the message at length, revealing as much about the crow as about the wife. This crow does not describe the events objectively, but harps on the fact that the wife's infidelity is an affront to Phebus' honor. He seems to find pleasure in his friend's grief, and to relish the uselessness of all his talents and the futility of all his efforts:

> "Phebus," quod he, "for al thy worthynesse,

[14] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis,* ed. Russell A Peck, The Middle English Texts Series, https://metseditions.org/texts/EMRNxgaGsrKYNiNEDuqva5s81z6DdrYW, III 796.

For al thy beautee and thy gentilesse,
For al thy song and al thy mynstralcye,
For al thy waityng, blered is thyn ye." (249–52)

He is doing much more than simply revealing the wife's adultery; he is revealing himself as a vicious and envious backbiter. He neglected the opportunity to chastise the wife herself and to call her to virtue or at least penitence (241), but once she has sinned he dwells on her sin and the shame she has brought to Phebus:

The crowe anon hym tolde,
By sadde tokenes and by wordes bolde,
How that his wyf had doon hire lecherye,
Hym to greet shame and to greet vileynye,
And tolde hym ofte he saugh it with his yen. (257–61)

Actions like those of the crow are not treated lightly by medieval writers on sin. Chaucer's Parson considers them under the heading of Ire:

> Now comth the synne of hem that sowen and maken discord amonges folk, which is a synne that Crist hateth outrely. And no wonder is, for he deyde for to make concord. And moore shame do they to Crist, than dide they that hym crucifiede, for God loveth bettre that freendshipe be amonges folk, than he dide his owene body, the which that he yaf for unitee. Therfore been they likned to the devel, that evere is aboute to maken discord. Now comth the synne of double tonge, swiche as speken faire byforn folk, and wikkedly bihynde, or elles they maken semblant as though they speke of good entencioun, or elles in game and pley, and yet they speke of wikked entente. (*ParT* 641–4)

Backbiting is linked with homicide, first in that it slays the one defamed ("þou slest anoþer, whan þou defamyst hym," as seynt Austyn seyth[15]), and second in that the detractor deprives not only himself but all his hearers of charity.[16]

The author of the *Ancrene Wisse* says that backbiting and egging someone on to do evil are the devil's own voice, and that the backbiter is like the satanic carrion crow – "þes deofles corbin of helle."[17] The crow in *The Manciple's Tale*, in turning on Phebus and backbiting his wife, is simply revealing his own nature as a crow, which has been disguised by his lovely appearance and sweet song, but has been left quite unmodified.

As with hypocrisy, so with backbiting: the Manciple shares these attitudes with his fictional creation. In speaking of the wife's infidelity, he too concentrates on the unworthiness of the lover, the insult to Phebus' honor and the worthlessness of Phebus' accomplishments, in language very like that of the crow:

This Phebus, which that thoghte upon no gile,
Deceyved was, for al his jolitee.

[15] *Jacob's Well*, p. 93.

[16] S. Bernardi Abbatis Clarae-Vallensis, *Sermones in Cantica*, *PL* 183, cols. 895–96.

[17] *Ancrene Wisse*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien, *EETS* 249, p. 44.

> For under hym another hadde shee,
> A man of litel reputacioun,
> Nat worth to Phebus in comparisoun. (196–200)

In his exemplary moralizations he also shows a great interest in cutting great people down to size. When he asserts that

> Ther nys no difference, trewely,
> Bitwixe a wyf that is of heigh degree,
> If of hir body dishonest she bee,
> And a povre wenche . . . (212–15)

one feels that the attack is grounded as much in the lady's high degree as in her dishonesty. He shows a similar delight in bringing the tyrant and the captain down to the level of the common thief, distinguishing them only in the amount of harm they are able to do (223–24). Such a man finds the humanized Phebus an appropriate and accessible target, so laden with accomplishments and so well situated as to arouse envy and yet so susceptible to a loss of pride through his excessive love for his wife.

The Manciple's treatment of the Cook, in his "real" world, shows a marked similarity to the crow's treatment of the wife. Instead of taking the Cook aside and chastising him for his drunkenness, he makes him a public spectacle, anatomizing his symptoms and provoking his anger. His refusal to speak privately and with good will marks him as uncharitable in the extreme, for his actions correspond perfectly with one of the standard examples of backbiting behavior:

> And if he repreve hym uncharitably of synne, as "thou holour," "thou drokelewe harlot," and so forth, thanne aperteneth that to the rejoysinge of the devel, that evere hath joye that men doon synne. And certes, chidynge may nat come but out of a vileyns herte. For after the habundance of the herte speketh the mouth ful ofte. And ye shul understonde that looke, by any wey, whan any man shal chastise another, that he be war from chidynge or reprevynge. For trewely, but he be war, he may ful lyghtly quyken the fir of angre and of wratthe, which that he sholde quenche, and peraventure sleeth hym, which that he myghte chastise with benignitee. (*ParT*, ll. 625–28)

When the Manciple tries to cover over his sinful behavior, he does so by compounding the sin, not only because he does so in a hypocritical way, but also because his method is to give the drunken Cook more to drink, leading to a worsening of the condition he should be trying to alleviate. When he was complaining of the Cook's mouth, saying that "The devel of helle sette his foot therin!" he should have been more concerned with the devil in his own mouth, for

> Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man: but what cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man... Do you not understand, that whatsoever entereth into the mouth, goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the privy? But the things which proceed out of the mouth, come forth from the heart, and those things defile a man. For from the heart

> come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies. These are the things that defile a man (Matt. 15:11–20).

Not surprisingly, Phebus does not seem to understand quite what is wrong with what the crow has done to him: we would not expect him to have a medieval confessor's knowledge of the varieties of sin. He concentrates on the disastrous effects of the crow's speech, not on its unrighteous intent. But he does show a glimmer of understanding that there was something wrong with the speech itself, although the only way he can express this is to claim that the words were literally untrue. He apostrophizes his wife as

> O deere wyf! O gemme of lustiheed!
> That were to me so sad and eek so trewe (274–75)

and despite the crow's testimony seems convinced that his wife was guiltless.

The crow's charges against the wife and the Manciple's charges against the Cook are true, but only in the modern sense of the word. The wife is an adulteress and the Cook is drunk. For a medieval reader, however, there was more to "true speech" than simple congruity with fact. True speech also requires the proper intention of the speaker. The author of *Dives and Pauper* examines an attitude which invalidates an utterance which nevertheless corresponds with the facts:

> . . . þe lawe schewith wel, xxii, q. li, Homines, et Is autem, þat ȝif a man seye a trewþe which trewþe he wenyth be fals, ȝif he seye it for to deseyuyn his euene cristene, in þat he lyhit. And so with a sothsawe a man and þe fend also may lye, as ȝif Y seyde to þe þat it were nouȝt day, for to lettyn þe of þy iorne, wenyng myself þat it wer day, alþey it wer as Y seyde, ȝit Y lyed.[18]

The most extreme case of a factual speech being "untrue" in this sense is the speech of the devil. Dives is at a loss to understand how a sin could remain hidden when it was known to the devil, since it would be in his interest to bring the sinner to shame. Pauper explains that everything the devil says is, when properly analyzed, a lie:

> DIUES: Syth þe fend knowith so many trewþes and whot what is don, for he is at euery wikkyd dede, me mervelyth mychil why he is so redy to lye and why he is so fals.
> PAUPER: For he hatiþ God þat is souereyn trewþe. And for þat he myȝth nouȝt be efne with God in souereynte of trewþe ne han þe name of souereyn trewþe þat is God, þerfor his lykyng and his trauayle is to ben souereyn falshed and souereynly fals. And þerfor Crist seyth in þe gospel þat þe fend stood neuer in trewþe, for þer is no trewþe in hym. When he spekith he spekith lesynges be weye of kende, for he is a lyer and fadir of lesyngys, Io. viii[44]. And so wheþir his tale be trewe or fals, seye he soth seye he fals, alwey he is fals, alwey a lyere. . . . þe fend tellyth trewþis of þinggys þat ben to come and oþir sothis also, wenyng hymself þat it ben fals. And so in his sothsawis he lyhyt, for he seyth þat trewthe vnwytingly, for deseyt, and wenyth to seyn fals. And ȝif he seye ony

[18] *Dives and Pauper*, ed. P.H. Barnum, *EETS* 275, pp. 154–55.

> trewþe wityng & wilynge, he seyth it only for to deseyuyn men and for a wykkid ende and for to don folc wyth on sothsawe leuyn a hondrid lesyngys. And so he is alwey fals and deseyuable.[19]

Just as both the crow and the Manciple are "swans" in their shared hypocrisy, so too in their shared backbiting and evil intent in speaking the literal "truth," they are both "crows," speakers of the devil's speech.

III. "Thow mortherere of the heysoge on the braunche"

The raven of *Metamorphoses* is plainly presented as Phoebus' possession, or as a servant: Phoebus is twice called the bird's "dominus" (II 547, 598). In Servius' *Commentary on the Aeneid*[20] the raven is a guard employed by Phoebus to keep an eye on Coronis. In the euhemerizing *Ovide Moralisé*,[21] the raven is presented as Phebus' "serf" (II 2469, II 2491) and in Gower, the bird belongs to the lady, and is "a fals bridd, which sche hath holde / And kept in chambre" (III 792–93). Chaucer's version stresses the relationship of friendly intimacy throughout: Phebus keeps the bird in his house, and fosters it, and trains it himself to speak and sing (130–38). When his well-trained pupil utters a raucous cry, he shows an almost fatherly disappointment:

> This crowe sang "Cokkow! cokkow! cokkow!"
> "What, bryd!" quod Phebus. "What song syngestow?
> Ne were thow wont so myrily to synge
> That to myn herte it was a rejoysynge
> To heere thy voys? Allas, what song is this?" (243–47)

Elsewhere, the raven simply does his job, but this crow is a fosterling acting in an unexpected way.

Like the bird in the Manciple's exemplum, who leaves his artificial environment in search of its natural habitat, the pampered crow at this point in the story loses both his civilized behavior and his merry singing. The "hidden nature" which is revealed here helps explain Chaucer's decision to change Phebus from a master into a protector and benefactor. The crow's triple call has a triple function. First, it is a bird-call rather than human speech, and it is more like the cry of a true crow than the nightingale song attributed to him earlier in the story. Second, it is the cry of a cuckoo, whose habit of laying her eggs in another bird's nest made her name a general reference to adultery: with a total lack of tact and consideration, the crow is calling Phebus a cuckold. Yet there is another trait of the cuckoo which is relevant here. In *The Parliament of Fowls*

[19] *Dives and Pauper*, p. 154.

[20] *Servii Grammatici qui feruntur in Vergilii Carmina Commentarii*, ed. G. Thilo and H. Hagen (Leipzig: Teubner, 1884), vol. 2, p. 192.

[21] *Ovide Moralisé*, ed. C. de Boer (Amsterdam: J. Muller, 1915–38), vol. 1, pp. 224–25.

the cuckoo is described as "unkynde" (358) because it turns against its foster parents once it is grown. It is this habit which causes the merlin to call it "mortherere of the heysoge on the braunche / That broghte the forth" (612–13), and leads to its inclusion in the symbols of filial ingratitude in *King Lear* (I. iv. 215–16). The crow reveals an identical nature: he is fostered and tenderly educated by Phebus, but in the moment of crisis he shows ingratitude, acting in a way which leads to the death, either physical or spiritual, of his "parents."

Similarly, the Manciple's delight in bringing fictional heroes and captains and ladies down to the level of ordinary mortals extends to his actions in real life. His entire introduction in *The General Prologue* is devoted to a description of his talents in outdoing others, especially those on whom he is dependent. He always comes out ahead in his bargaining (568–72), and though uneducated he can surpass his learned employers:

> Now is nat that of God a ful fair grace
> That swich a lewed mannes wit shal pace
> The wisdom of an heep of lerned men? (573–75)

All thirty of his masters are "expert and curious" (577), and twelve of them are "Worthy to been stywardes of rente and lond of any lord" (579–80), but for all their learning and all their worthiness, "this Manciple sette hir aller cappe" (586). Like the crow, the Manciple bites the hand that feeds him. His delight in a story of the deflation of a gentleman's pride and the uselessness of his efforts to protect his position against the assaults of lesser men is a perfect parallel to his wishes toward his real-life employers. Both the Manciple and his literary creature, then, may now be seen as ingrates, hypocrites, and backbiters, that is, cuckoos, swans, and crows.

IV. "Though he seie with the þat white is þe crowe . . ."

A major problem with *The Manciple's Tale* is the fact that neither his story nor his *exempla* mean what he says that they mean. His story shows the dangers of sinfulness and sinful actions. The wife suffers for the sin of lechery, Phebus suffers for the sins of ire and despair, and the crow suffers for the combination of his silence in the face of the wife's misbehavior and his evilly intentioned revelations to Phebus. Yet none of this forms a part of the Manciple's imposed "message" for the tale, as he proceeds to quote fifty-three lines of his mother's moralization about the dangers of speech in general. The biblical and classical origin of these lines points up the fact that even the devil (or his dam) can quote scripture. The Manciple's overt purpose with this *tour de force* is to impose silence on the Cook and to smother the true meaning of his story under a blanket of false verbiage – false, that is, in the way that the devil's speech is always false even if it happens to be in accord with facts, since its aim is to deceive.

The same may be said with regard to the various explanatory intrusions the Manciple makes in the body of his narrative. When he tells the three stories indicating that the

true nature of an animal comes out regardless of human efforts, he subtly distorts them so as to show a malicious attitude toward that nature. In the *Boece*, the point of such stories is to show

> . . . how that Nature, myghty, enclyneth and flytteth the governementz of thynges, and by whiche lawes sche, purveiable, kepith the grete world; and how sche, byndynge, restreyneth alle thynges by a boond that may nat be unbownde (Bk.III Met.2 2–7).

The workings of Nature may be seen in the fact that a caged bird places freedom before the artificial delicacies imposed on it by human beings. But the Manciple adds the detail that once the bird is in the wild it will eat "wormes and swich wrecchednesse" (171), and thereby transforms an *exemplum* about the power of Nature into a story about baseness of the particular nature of the bird. The cat who will abandon human food to eat a mouse is also revealing a nature which does not come up to the Manciple's standards:

> Lo, heere hath lust his dominacioun,
> And appetit fleemeth discrecioun (181–82).

The source for the third of the animal *exempla*, *Le Livre de Chasse*[22], explains that the she-wolf chooses the most wretched male as a mate because he has suffered and labored for her the most, as his wretchedness reveals. The Manciple presents the fact but ignores the reason, finding in the she-wolf nothing but "a vileyns kynde" (183). The more he examines a situation, gathering together examples from different sources, the more evil he discovers, perverting a hymn to Nature into a muck-raking diatribe.

The place of these *exempla* in the narrative, right after a statement about the impossibility of keeping a wife chaste against her will, makes it clear that they are analogues to the situation of the wife. Like the animals, she has a villainous nature and will turn away from Phebus, yielding to her appetites and choosing a mate who is not as worthy as Phebus. Despite this obvious direction taken by his story, the Manciple insists that the exempla mean something quite different. They are not, he says, about the wife at all, or even about women, but refer to the behavior of men:

> Alle this ensamples speke I by thise men
> That been untrewe, and nothyng by wommen.
> For men have evere a likerous appetit
> On lower thyng to parfourne hire delit
> Than on hire wyves, be they never so faire,
> Ne never so trewe ne so debonaire. (187–92)

As if to reinforce the fact that he is in the habit of saying that things mean the opposite of what they really mean, he proceeds immediately to another reversal of gender. Having called the wife's lover a "lemman" (204), he continues with a defence of his use of

[22]Gaston Phébus, *Livre de Chasse*, in W. Bryan and G. Dempster, *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (New York: Humanities Press, 1941), p. 721.

such an uncouth word. When he does so, however, it is on the basis of the lack of real difference between *women* who would be called "ladies" and women who would be called "lemmans." This leads him to a number of other examples in which he expresses a preference for plain speech over euphemisms. This in no way suggests that the Manciple is an adherent of the truth, for we still must wonder why he regularly prefers the opprobrious term, which leads to a diminution of charity, to the less judgmental term, which would more likely have been chosen by, for example, Chaucer the pilgrim.

This particular disease of language which the Manciple suffers is also associated with a proverbial expression related to crows. The connection between crows and blackness is well-established in several areas of medieval culture. Not only is "black as a crow" a common expression, but philosophers used the crow's blackness as the standard example of an inseparable accident, that is, a characteristic which is not part of an object's essence but is never absent from the object.[23] To "say that the crow is white" therefore becomes a proverbial expression for declaring the exact opposite of the truth, to "swear that black is white." The earliest example I have found of this phrase is in *Peter Idley's Instructions to His Son*, as the father warns against trusting an old enemy:

> Though he seie with the þat white is þe crowe,
> And be redy alsoo when þou hem calle,
> Yet resteth the olde malice in his bitter galle.[24]

Chaucer has made the man who tells the story of the white crow into a man who will interpret whatever he says according to his own best interests, even if the interpretation is the exact opposite of the truth – a man who will say that the crow is white.

V. "Nolite iudicare, ut non iudicemini."

When we look at the tale of the white raven in the *Metamorphoses* from a classical or, I am afraid, from a modern point of view, the lesson we learn is very much like the moral the Manciple attaches to it. The raven's error is simply that he spoke about a matter which should have been kept secret. But Chaucer went further as a reader of Ovid, and considered both the moral implications of the raven's actions and the nature of the mind which could overlook their sinfulness and see them only in terms of pragmatism. The raven is responsible for the death of Coronis and the mortal sin of Phoebus, so it must be made clear in a Chaucerian version of the story that the intent of his speech is

[23]Porphyry, *Isagoge*, tr. E.W. Warren (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1975), pp. 48–49. See also Peter of Spain, *Tractatus*, ed. L.M. de Rijk (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972), p. 23.

[24]*Peter Idley's Instructions to his Son*, ed. C. D'Evelyn (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1935), I 439–441. Other early examples may be found in *Jacke Jugeler*, l. 1019, in *Four Tudor Comedies*, ed. William Tydeman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984); and in Henry Medwall, *Fulgens and Lucrece*, l. 164, and Francis Merbury, *The Marriage Between Wit and Wisdom*, l. 62, both in *English Moral Interludes*, ed. Glynne Wickham (London: Dent, 1976).

sinful, calculated to destroy charity and lead others in to sin. This is done by choosing the word "crowe," with its associations with the devil, as a translation for "corvus"; by removing elements of undercutting irony from the story; by humanizing the god to highlight the disastrous consequences of the bird's action; by reminding us that the bird kept silent when it would have been productive to speak; and by expanding the speech of revelation to show its unholy glee in backbiting. In order to underline the lack of charity and unnatural selfishness of the bird's actions, Chaucer increased the strength of the tie with Phebus, making the crow a fosterling who, like the cuckoo, destroys the people who gave it sustenance. Further, he transforms Ovid's "poetic justice" attitude toward metamorphoses (Lycon, for example, in Book One, acts like a ravenous wolf before he is physically changed into a wolf) into a moral statement. Not only is the crow really a sinful crow before he is changed from white to black, but even his whiteness and his singing ability must be seen as emblems of a sinful hypocrisy.

To be able to tell such a story, with these modifications, and yet still adhere to the pragmatic interpretation of the events, a man would have to be seriously flawed. He must share with his characters a culpable ignorance of the difference between a sinful act and a simply impractical one. Like Phebus, he must believe that haste is what leads to disaster, not recognizing that rational assent to a sinful action makes it a more deadly sin. Like the crow, he must be a hypocrite, a backbiter and an ingrate, so that he may reveal these characteristics to us without being aware of them himself. Ideally, his participation in these sins should be revealed not only through his specific actions of the pilgrimage, as in his *Prologue* with the Cook, but also through the description of his more general nature, as in *The General Prologue*, and through his manner of transforming his simple narrative line into a complete work of literature. In this way, the point can be made that there is a congruity between literary activity and everyday life: the way the Manciple reads Ovid and the way that he tells his tale are as important to the revelation of his character as are the ways that the crow interprets the wife's adultery and reveals it to Phebus. Finally, to ensure that we recognize the importance of the fact that the Manciple does not understand the meaning of his own story, he must be shown to give it an interpretation which is at odds with the thrust of the story. He must be a man who acts as if words mean what he says they mean, who believes that he is in control, after the fact, of the significance of his own speech. Such a man is, of course, a man who would say that the crow is white.

A work like *The Manciple's Tale* could come into being only by means of a reading of the traditional versions of the tale which suspends disbelief: the characters and their actions must be seen as real, not simply parts of a literary work, so that they may be judged according to new standards of morality. Further, the "literariness" of the original must also be suppressed. A purely aesthetic reading of the story in Ovid, for example, could not find fault with him for the insufficiency of the pragmatic view of the events implied there. But by assigning this tale to a man like the Manciple and expecting his

audience to see the congruity between the man and the literature he produces, Chaucer is running a risk. If we judge the Manciple harshly for his insistence on creating a story which delights in the destruction of Phebus, what are we to think of Chaucer, whose own story is of the ruthless unmasking of the sinful Manciple?

But just as it is not only as "auctor newe of tidynges" that the Manciple reveals his malice, so it is not only Chaucer the author who is open to a charge of seeing the mote in his neighbor's eye. The most obvious parallel between literary and extra-literary people is between the Manciple and the critical reader. Chaucer is following a well-defined pattern here, with both Classical and Biblical sources, for enforcing self-consciousness on a judgmental audience. Horace writes a poem about Tantalus, but then warns his readers not to laugh, for "Mutato nomine, de te / fabula narratur" [if the name is changed, the story is told about you] [25] and then proceeds to point out that they too are slaves of desires which they cannot satisfy. In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan tells David the story of a rich man who stole a poor man's ewe, and when the king condemns the man in the story, the prophet says "Tu es ill vir" [Thou art the man], and David repents for the "theft" of Bethsabee and the death of Urias, uttering, we are told, the penitential Psalm 50. The similarities are as close with our reading of *The Manciple's Tale*. The closer the Manciple looks at birds, cats, wolves, women and tyrants, the more base the nature he sees becomes. He proceeds step by step from an analysis of the Cook's behavior and symptoms to a public denunciation and condemnation. The closer we look at the crow and the Manciple, the more malice and sinfulness we discover, moving from particular actions through to a full dossier based on a rigid set of judgmental categories. Our reading leads us into the same spiritual morass in which the Manciple is foundering. We do not even have the luxury of claiming that we "did not mean it that way," since the tactic of trying to control the meaning of one's words after they have been uttered has been shown to be one of the Manciple's most dangerous traits. *The Manciple's Tale* is one of those that "sownen into synne," but if the process of interpretation is carried far enough it does so only in the sense that it is necessary to proceed through an experiential knowledge of sin in order to recognize the need for repentance and reform.

For it is entirely appropriate that an analysis of a story of a woman taken in adultery should end in the silence which follows the injunction "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone," and that such a silence lead to Chaucer's fourteenth-century version of a penitential psalm, *The Parson's Tale*.

[25]Horace, *Satires and Epistles*, ed, Edward P. Morris (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), I i 69–70.